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Joyce's Kaleidoscope: An Invitation to "Finnegans Wake" [Review]

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(October 1950), 438.

¹⁰ See Daniel Ferrer, Lernout, and Vincent Deane, eds., *The "Finnegans Wake" Notebooks at Buffalo* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2001-2003).

¹¹ Carol Loeb Shloss, *Lucia Joyce: To Dance in the "Wake"* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003).

¹² Claudette Sartiliot, *Citation and Modernity: Derrida, Joyce, and Brecht* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p. 8.

¹³ See David Hayman, ed., *The First Draft Version of "Finnegans Wake"* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1963), and Roland McHugh, *Annotations to "Finnegans Wake"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980).

¹⁴ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Danis Rose (London: Picador Press, 1997).

¹⁵ Theall, *James Joyce's Techno-Poetics* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1997).

¹⁶ See Ezra Pound, *Make It New: Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934).

¹⁷ Louis Armand, ed., *Joycemia: James Joyce, Hypermedia, & Textual Genetics* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2004).

¹⁸ Ben Leubner, "Getting Hyper about Text," review of *Joycemia: James Joyce, Hypermedia, & Textual Genetics*, *James Joyce Literary Supplement*, 20 (Fall 2006), 4-5. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

JOYCE'S KALEIDOSCOPE: AN INVITATION TO "FINNEGANS WAKE," by Philip Kitcher. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 327 pp. \$35.00 cloth; \$21.95 paper.

Books about *Finnegans Wake* announce their forms with unusual regularity: skeleton keys, plot summaries, reader's guides, first-draft versions, lexicons, gazetteers, censuses, genetic guides, annotations, and more. Every form offers a particular route through the *Wake*, and we hope our collective efforts add up to a cartography of possibilities. But until now we have never been issued an "invitation" to the *Wake*. Many readers of this journal will realize that they must have invited themselves uncouthly to the *Wake* long ago, and some will imagine that it is too late for invitations when one has already been at the party for so long. Indeed, Philip Kitcher's *Joyce's Kaleidoscope* seems addressed to daunted would-be readers (and to be priced for readers rather than only libraries) or to passionate enthusiasts like Kitcher himself, rather than to Joyce scholars. Because Kitcher addresses a general audience and shrinks from engaging current discussions of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce scholars may find his book of limited relevance to their own critical concerns. It is, however, a work of creativity and intelligence, and rookies and veterans alike might profitably respond to its implicit imperative: *répondez s'il vous plait*.

Kitcher, the John Dewey Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University, writes about his long attraction to and relationship with *Finnegans Wake*, which stretches back to his school days. But *Joyce's*

Kaleidoscope issues more directly from Kitcher's *Finnegans Wake* "support group," formed in 2000 with colleagues finally to "read the huge novel together" (xvi). It was through this experience that Kitcher's two main theses about the *Wake* emerged: that *Finnegans Wake* is a musical text whose mood and "emotional tone" invite readers to begin the long process "out of which more precise understanding can grow" and that it is a book about "evaluating a life, from the perspective of age. It is no longer a matter of deciding what to do, for the doing is done, but of coming to terms with what has been, of hoping to vindicate the long years that are now running out" (xxi, xx).

The reading-group origins of *Joyce's Kaleidoscope* seem evident in the form and ideas of the book. A *Wake* reading group is often a satisfying way of reading the text, for there is strength and safety in numbers. One of the most interesting effects of such a group, however, seems to be the curious and peculiar culture that each different group forms. I am struck most by the truly bizarre and wonderful modes of interaction and friendship that the book encourages through its free play and bawdiness. But each culture will also begin to take on idiosyncratic and even symptomatic relationships to the *Wake* itself, often hardening into the form of habit: some themes reemerge, and others recede; some references are worth tracking, and others are not; and some approaches come to be preferred and are seldom challenged. This is why, while many Joyceans enjoy the benefits of *Wake* groups, a critic's own work is best when informed by the larger and more challenging sphere of criticism. Group habits do not exclude insights, but they may become limitations.

Joyce's Kaleidoscope seems limited and insightful in these terms. Joyce scholars may be disappointed by the almost total lack of engagement with their own long and productive efforts. Kitcher wants to start "from a gestalt on the work" and "to identify large structures and themes, moods and tones," and he can be rather dismissive of the *Wake's* "very unusual secondary literature," characterized as "reader's guides and plot summaries, censuses of Joyce's sources and annotations to every page" (45, 44). But there are books in the *Wake's* critical canon that *do* read from the general to the particular, not to mention many articles in the wholly bracketed world of the scholarly journal. Kitcher simply does not read these: "With the exception of [John] Bishop's imaginative study, most of the secondary literature on the *Wake* is obsessed with the details of plot" (49).¹

But the insights into the *Wake* that Kitcher offers come directly from his training as a philosopher, and the difference between the philosopher and the literary critic accounts for what will, no doubt, be the value and interest of the author's book to both enthusiasts and critics. Whereas literary critics are often concerned with questions of meaning, whether stable or unstable, they are seldom concerned

with matters of wisdom. Kitcher treats *Finnegans Wake* as a discourse of wisdom about the anxiety of aging, the evaluation of life, and the approach of death: his "*Wake* is concerned . . . with the question . . . 'How is one to live?'" (254). Repeatedly, we are told, "Joyce's dreamer is an aging man whose deepest anxiety revolves around whether the life he has almost completed makes sense" and "who struggles to integrate the facets of himself and his life" (56, 53). The philosophical language of how to live one's life may be a form of discourse to which literary critics have become entirely unaccustomed. This discourse itself is an invitation to think through what value there may be in reading the *Wake* for wisdom rather than for meaning, meaninglessness, or "plot." Is it wise to read this way? Is it wise to read the *Wake* for wisdom at all? What would it mean to have a book that is at once so wise and yet so resistant to meaning? One can imagine these and many other fruitful responses to Kitcher's approach.

The elusive thing about wisdom, however, and the reason literary critics tend to quote rather than use the word, is that it seems contingent upon one's own subject position. And this is where Kitcher's reading of the *Wake* may collapse back into the shifting play of meanings with which literary critics have been trying to come to terms for years. As others have observed about the *Wake*, it is just as much a "Rorschach test" as it is a retrospective kaleidoscope of an aging dreamer's life.² One can imagine other readers who would hear very different music in *Finnegans Wake* than Kitcher's "autumnal tone, retrospective, questioning, aware of limitations and of possibilities unrealized" (4). Read with other emphases, *Finnegans Wake* would be not autumnal but exuberantly vernal, positively bristling with limitations overcome and intoxicated by realizable possibilities only yet unrealized. Rather than a retrospective life, we might emphasize instead the "general thumbtonosery" of the book's children (FW 253.28). Although the cyclic qualities of the book imply that the "child-dream's hours" too will end (FW 219.05-06), one may read the *Wake* as a Gracehoper's heady celebration of the now and of the passing of the old. If the *Wake* is a cycle, then it matters very much where we choose to hop on, and we will be inclined to hop on according to who we are and from where we leap. But if HCE in Joyce's earliest drafts was known as Pop,³ then perhaps we are even licensed to read the *Wake* as an extended gloss on that irreverent, youthful, and "suessiest" of books, *Hop on Pop* (FW 234.18).⁴

The question of the *Wake*'s mood and tone, however, is more than a matter of inflection. To see it as autumnal is to accept failure, unrealized dreams, and, ultimately, the status quo and states of bittersweet nostalgia. It seems emblematic of this perspective that, when history or politics emerges in Kitcher's discourse, the subject is brushed aside: "I reject the view that the *Wake* provides a new perspective on

the great figures of human history or on the process by which they are embedded" (68). How can it be a new perspective if the book is about a race that has already been run? Indeed, Kitcher is more interested in styling Joyce as a liberal humanist than engaging in important historical and political matters: "Joyce's distinctive brand of humanism, centered upon what I have called the 'Joycean virtues,' can be viewed as a particular development of [the] tradition [of] approaching questions of value through understanding our sentiments. [Joyce] takes the refinement of our attitudes to consist in extending and enlarging our sympathetic appreciation of others" (256). The "Joycean virtues" themselves consist of "kindness, generosity, patience, tolerance, [and] forgiveness" (xxii).

One fertile critical path that *Joyce's Kaleidoscope* seeks to broaden is our attention to the music of the *Wake*, its orchestral and symphonic moods and range. Unfortunately, Kitcher could not develop this route as much as he may have wished: "I prepared a recording of selected passages to serve as further elaboration and defense of the interpretation I offer in the present book, hoping that this recording could accompany the printed text. Unfortunately, permission to distribute the recording in this way has not been granted" (xiii). Even with this limitation, Kitcher has certainly captured a specific music skillfully enough that many new invitees to the *Wake* may catch the tune. But in an important sense, his book is less an invitation than a provocative example of somebody accepting an invitation: it models the ways in which we all might come to the *Wake* at first by hearing what we know. It is after this that we are compelled to hear what others know.

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NOTES

¹ John Bishop, *James Joyce's Book of the Dark: "Finnegans Wake"* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

² See Bishop's "Introduction" to James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Penguin Publishers, 1999), p. xi.

³ See David Hayman, *The "Wake" in Transit* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 105-16.

⁴ Dr. Seuss, *Hop on Pop* (New York: Random House, 1963).